

# BROWSING THROUGH BIRKE'S

An Exhibit by Szifra Birke

PATRICK J. MOGAN  
CULTURAL CENTER



Working People Exhibit

June 25 - August 30, 1994  
Monday through Saturday  
9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

40 French Street, Lowell Massachusetts



## Dedication

The horrors of the Holocaust are beyond the scope of most people's imaginations — a merciful reality, for most would be unable to endure the images. But for those who were there and survived, for those whose families were destroyed by the ruthless members of the Nazi regime, the memories will not fade. Nor do they want them to, for only through remembrance are they assured that their losses were not totally in vain.

Six million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust, as well as five million others, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, Gypsies, the mentally and physically ill, homosexuals and political opponents. This exhibit is dedicated to those survivors who, like Nathan and Sally Birke, vowed to "Never forget."

There are no formal graves for the victims. Few markers exist as testimony of what they endured. This exhibit stands as my attempt to bring Nathan and Sally, my parents, to life so that all who reflect on it may have a better understanding of the background of the victims, many of whom, like my parents, had their entire families annihilated in the Nazi death camps.

Birke's Department Store epitomizes the survivors' story, and brings to life the complexity of these refugees and the customs they brought with them from Europe — hard work, devotion to family, a hunger for knowledge.

Nathan brought with him the ravages of loss. He lost his father to typhus, thereby losing his childhood. As the oldest, and a son, he assumed responsibility for his mother and four young sisters at the age of nine. Finally, he lost faith in humanity and in God as a result of the savage butchery of everyone in his family except three cousins.

He vowed to never forget, and anyone who had contact with him knows he didn't. Everyday, he testified of the Holocaust to all who came into Birke's Department Store. Whether they wanted to listen or not, strangers and friends, Jews or Gentiles, Nathan told them. Even when paying for clothes, customers were confronted with articles about Nazis from pages of Jewish newspapers he stapled to the wall behind the cash register. Like the braids, tight knots and waves of human hair that still hang today in an Auschwitz barrack, Nathan shocked people into the reality of the Holocaust, forcing them to face human beings' darkest side.

# פוינסט ציט צוריק היסטארישן בלוט-בלב קלען-פירער באגייט זעלבסטמארד, ווען וויין אידען-אפשטאם ווערט אויפגעדעקט

בראם איז געווען דער ווייז פון  
דער אנטשטעטישער מענטש  
פון דעם קי קליט קליט

דער פוינסט ציט צוריק היסטארישן בלוט-בלב, קלען-פירער באגייט זעלבסטמארד, ווען וויין אידען-אפשטאם ווערט אויפגעדעקט. דער פוינסט ציט צוריק היסטארישן בלוט-בלב, קלען-פירער באגייט זעלבסטמארד, ווען וויין אידען-אפשטאם ווערט אויפגעדעקט. דער פוינסט ציט צוריק היסטארישן בלוט-בלב, קלען-פירער באגייט זעלבסטמארד, ווען וויין אידען-אפשטאם ווערט אויפגעדעקט.

דער פוינסט ציט צוריק היסטארישן בלוט-בלב, קלען-פירער באגייט זעלבסטמארד, ווען וויין אידען-אפשטאם ווערט אויפגעדעקט. דער פוינסט ציט צוריק היסטארישן בלוט-בלב, קלען-פירער באגייט זעלבסטמארד, ווען וויין אידען-אפשטאם ווערט אויפגעדעקט. דער פוינסט ציט צוריק היסטארישן בלוט-בלב, קלען-פירער באגייט זעלבסטמארד, ווען וויין אידען-אפשטאם ווערט אויפגעדעקט.

One of several Yiddish newspapers containing articles about Nazis that Nathan stapled to the wall behind the cash register at Birke's.

Sala (Sally) Dymantsztajn Birke, thirteen years younger than Nathan, brought with her the perseverance and commitment a European wife felt toward her husband and marriage, no matter what. She brought an ability to focus on today, and a knack for making her Lowell customers feel special as she had done in the Lodz, Poland, clothing store where she worked full time from the age of thirteen, after leaving school to help support her family. She brought her own parent's warmth and love for their children. Sally's own memories of the Holocaust, including the loss of her entire family, all but a few cousins, have remained with her always. There is not a day she does not remember.

**Fleeing Poland**  
World War II began in September of 1939, when the German army invaded the western half of Poland, the home of almost two million Jews. They were forced to move into ghettos surrounded by walls and barbed wire. Conditions were deplorable.



When Germany invaded, the Jews in Poland believed only young men, who would be impressed into hard labor, were in danger. Sally's parents sent her oldest brother, Moishe Aaron, to Russia for safety. Before long, they thought they had acted too hastily. They missed their son dreadfully, and wanted him home.

Accompanied by Nathan, a business associate of her father, Sally was sent to Russia to retrieve her brother. Moishe Aaron eventually left Russia, but Nathan, intuitively certain that some disaster awaited them in Poland, refused to let Sally return. He told her that he had "signed them up to work" in the Russian coal mines of Siberia, and that if she tried to cross the border back to Poland she would be killed. Sally believed him and out of a sense of morality and necessity, Sally and Nathan exchanged vows less than two months later.

They remained in Russia from 1939 until the war ended in 1945, having received little news of the war's atrocities. Sally gave birth to two sons during that time, but with food, warmth and medical attention being almost non-existent, death took them both.

They returned to Poland, expecting to reunite with their families, but what they found was almost unspeakable. Nathan's mother and four sisters, their husbands and children, Sally's mother and father, Moishe Aaron, her other brother and a sister, their aunts, uncles, neighbors and friends were all murdered. Sally's only sister, Lusia, who gave her food rations to her mother, had starved to death in the Lodz ghetto.

Sally went to her home and, looking in the window, saw that the cupboards her father, Lazar, had made to hold their clothes and shoes were now being used by total strangers. The building's janitor told her "...all went to the ghetto. None came back."

Though penniless, Nathan chose not to reclaim his business holdings: his apartment buildings, restaurants, and a meat factory. Unable to endure the sights of such a different world, they left immediately and eventually came to Lowell via Czechoslovakia, Austria, Germany, Paris and New York.

### **Starting Over**

Nathan and Sally became live-in janitors at Temple Beth El in Lowell. They saved every penny, subsisting primarily on leftovers from functions held at the synagogue. Struggling to learn yet

another new language and adjust to a strange country and culture, they also grappled with heartbreaking sadness.

Determined to make their lives meaningful again, they saved enough money to open the first Birke's Department Store on Back Central Street in 1948. There, they lived in a back room which was used for storage during the day. At night, excess stock would be moved to the "store" to make room for cooking, dining and sleeping. Their son, Lenny, slept in an orange crate on the floor.

Some wholesalers refused to deal with Nathan because his business was so small, but one way or another, he changed their minds. He waited for one New York wholesaler in the bathroom of his factory for three hours. When the man finally came in to relieve himself, Nathan pushed him up against the wall and demanded, "You have to do business with me. My money is as good as anyone's." Shocked, the man agreed, and the two men eventually became lifelong friends.



Woe be it to anyone who ignored this sign which "greeted" customers as they stepped into Birke's.

### **"NO BROWSING!"**

Birke's moved from Back Central to Gorham to Market Street, where Sally continues to manage the store today. Nathan passed away in 1992, and though the man is gone, his memory remains forever etched in the minds of Lowellians. Although he was deft at buying wholesale, his approach to sales and customer relations would give most retailers nightmares.

One day, handing Nancy Donohue, a prominent member of the Lowell community, a



black crayon and an old piece of cardboard, Nathan ordered her to write "NO BROWSING" in big block letters. When she finished, to her surprise, he instantly tacked the directive to a post in the front of the store.

And woe be it to anyone who ignored that sign. "Vhat do you vant?" Nathan would interrogate the casual shopper.

"Oh, I'm just looking," was the usual unwary reply.

"No lookers. Ve vant buyers! You vant to browse, go to a library! At least dare you vill loin someting!" Nathan would declare, just before throwing the hapless shopper out.

Nathan threw about ten thousand potential customers out of the store over the years, for such offenses as browsing or conversely, being too picky. Coming in to buy a blue suit, one man was told, "You vant a blue zoot? Vy you no join da Navy, dhen you get a blue zoot free!"

Nathan held court at a small metal TV tray in the center of the store. Seated there, he shocked listeners with brutal tales of the Holocaust. He made his scorn of politics and religion known through endless monologues punctuated with obscenities. And all the while, he kept an eye peeled for those hated browsers. Birke's was not for the meek.

### **Harsh words, compassionate souls**

However, Nathan and Sally saw to it that those in need were taken care of. Scores of customers today recall Sally's gestures of generosity; despite his disposition, customers also recount stories of Nathan's charity. As referenced in the exhibit video, he donated tons of clothing and often reduced prices for those in need.

If Nathan's self-assigned job was to harry and haggle, Sally's was to feed and to comfort. To this day, she greets customers with a kind word and trays of homemade goodies, coffee and tea. She has an uncanny ability to remember details from conversations with shoppers. Tell her about your sister in New York; return six months later and she'll greet you warmly and ask, "How's your sister, the one in New York?" In a way, her customers became her extended family and her community.

### **Secrets of Success**

Therein lies the truth of Birke's, the reason why it succeeded against all odds. One way or another,

shoppers got something there they didn't get at other stores. If you survived Nathan's test, you were treated to quality merchandise at reasonable prices and alterations and assistance from Filomena Espinola, an employee for over twenty years, as well as coffee from Sally.

Everyone shopped at Birke's, from the wealthy lawyer to the impoverished, former mill worker, and they remember the clothes, often better than the events for which they were purchased. In great detail, customers will tell you about their little Rothschild coat with matching leggings and hat, or the boy's suit with its brass buttons, bought for Easter thirty years ago and later passed down to two brothers before being sent on to a favorite cousin. "Birke's clothes wore like iron."

### **The Exhibit**

"Browsing Through Birke's" is meant as a reminder of not only Nathan and Sally's hard work, sorrows and legacies, but also as a celebration of the immigrant experience.

Reflect on clothing of the past, the workmanship and attention to detail that is so hard to find nowadays. Take in the different panels of the exhibit, the memories and truths of the past they reveal. Check out the customer panel, the "rules" on getting in, the comments about mannequins with no hands, and Nathan making Andrew Dice Clay seem like a choir boy. Each panel contains a piece of the Birke's story, including a sometimes discordant reminder of the Holocaust framed in black; but remember, the Holocaust is the loom on which Birke's was spun.

Take your time. Feel free to browse.

### **PROJECT TEAM**

Project Director: Szifra Birke

Project Consultant: Lisa Hochstein

Film Consultant / Exhibit Photographer: Jim Higgins

Video Assistant: Jonathan La Bonté

Graphics and Signage: Lisa Hochstein Graphics

Writer: Judy Glidden, The Write Knack

Installation: Peg Shanahan

Hospitality: Sally Birke

Lowell Historic Preservation:

Gretchen Sanders Joy, Juliet Mofford and Martha Norkunas

Lowell National Historical Park

Lowell Office of Cultural Affairs



## THE PATRICK J. MOGAN CULTURAL CENTER

The mission of the Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center is to "tell the human story found in the history of the United States as an industrial nation, especially by concentrating on the lives of the working people of Lowell, Massachusetts." The Center, which opened in 1989, is named in honor of Lowell's former Superintendent of Schools who developed the concept of an urban park focused on Lowell's unique heritage.

This former Boott Mills boardinghouse, built around 1837, was rehabilitated by the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission, an agency of the U.S. Department of the Interior. It is an appropriate setting for the Lowell National Historical Park's interpretive exhibits on the theme of the Working People: Mill Girls, Immigrants, and Labor. A wide variety of cultural programs is offered here throughout the year. The Center also houses the University of Massachusetts at Lowell Center for Lowell History, and the University's Downtown Center for Continuing Education.

## LOWELL HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

The Lowell Historic Preservation Commission was authorized in 1978 "to tell the human story of the Industrial Revolution in a 19th century setting by encouraging cultural expression in Lowell." Its historic preservation program works to preserve historic buildings and create a recreational trail along Lowell's canals. Its cultural programs interpret the Commission's themes through public art, performing arts, cultural grants, exhibits, conferences, publications, folklife, oral history, ethnic heritage and labor projects. For further information, call (508) 458-7653.

## LOWELL OFFICE OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Lowell Office of Cultural Affairs co-sponsors temporary exhibits at the Mogan Cultural Center through its Cooperative Agreement with the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission.

The mission of the Lowell Office of Cultural Affairs (LOCA) is to identify the ways and means to expand cultural opportunities and choices. LOCA manages the Lowell Museum Cultural Fund which provides a financial resource for those who create, present, and preserve the culture of the city through exhibits at the Mogan Cultural Center. For information or to receive The Local, a bi-monthly calendar of Lowell events, call (508) 459-9899.

## TEMPORARY EXHIBITS

Any organization, group, or individual interested in developing an exhibit at the Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center on its themes, should contact the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission at 222 Merrimack Street, Suite 310, Lowell, MA 01852, (508) 458-7653. A staff member will send you an application and if approved, your proposal will then be recommended to the Mogan Community Advisory Board.